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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to analyze the content of stories in several basal reading systems widely used in primary grade reading instruction. The investigation was in terms of the relative frequency of main characters who are elderly, the portrayal of elderly characters in relation to other characters in the stories, the incidence of aging themes, and incidental references to aging or the elderly--as well as a question on non-human and human characters. Two hundred ninety-eight stories were analyzed using the primary grade (K-3) reading instructional materials of two different textbook publishers. Results showed that (1) the elderly do not appear as primary characters in stories to any great degree, (2) most elderly human characters were portrayed in a positive manner, (3) a higher percentage of elderly non-human characters are portrayed as negative, and (4) more negative than positive statements about the elderly appear in the stories, while the opposite is true about the young and adults. Conclusions point to the fact that far too few elderly appear as primary characters in basal reader stories and, when they do appear, far too many negative statements are made about them. (Tables of data and a two-page reference list are included.) (NKA)

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DEPICTIONS OF AGING AND THE ELDERLY IN PRIMARY GRADE READING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL

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DEPICTIONS OF AGING AND THE ELDERLY IN PRIMARY GRADE READING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

INTRODUCTION

Gerontologists and others who study attitudes toward the aging process and the elderly consistently find negative stereotyping of the elderly by large segments of the American population(Harris, 1975; McTavish, 1971). Stereotyping is a routine means of dealing with a class of unfamiliar objects, in this case, the elderly(Brubaker & Powers, 1976).

Ageism is a pervasive theme in American society. Butler (1974, p. 11) defined ageism "as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old."

Children also internalize and accept dominant stereotypes of the elderly at early ages. Children have a generally unpleasant image of growing old and the elderly. In a study by Serock, Seefeldt, Jantz and Galper (1977), findings indicate that most of 180 children (ages 3 to 11) questioned described the elderly in negative ways. They were seen as "wrinkled, short, and gray-haired," people who "chew funny," "don't go out much," "sit all day and watch TV in their rocking chairs," and "have heart attacks and die." In response to being asked about their feelings about growing old themselves, most indicated that they didn't want to do it.

Such stereotypes, which are often communicated by parents, teachers, and peers, promote the growth of ageism in children. Several studies have investigated the ways in which informal agencies of socialization, such as the mass media, support development of these dominant stereotypes.

Related Studies

Negative stereotyping of age is found in media of all varieties. Studies of Saturday morning television (Bishop & Krause, 1984), general television programming (Ansello, 1978), television commercials (Francher, 1973), adolescent literature (Peterson & Karnes, 1976), novels (Loughan, 1977), and magazine cartoons (Smith, 1979) find the elderly depicted in a negative way, relegated to minor roles, or not depicted at all.

The media reflect symbolically the attitudes and values held by society. By reflecting the images, ideals, and values of society, the media also aid in creating, reinforcing, and maintaining them. So the symbols of the elderly and aging found in the media reflect the dominant stereotypes held by society about the elderly and aging.

Stereotypes are categorizations, and they often become the basis for human action regardless of their objective validity or lack of it. The infrequency of the symbols and categorizations of old age, their portrayal in trivial terms, or the failure to represent them at all have potential significance for the creation or maintenance of negative stereotypes. Tuchman (1978) calls this pattern of symbolization "symbolic annihilation."

The elderly, as objects of symbolic annihilation appear as "partial people," they are not developed, and they are only tangential to the "mainstream" of life around them. Robin (1977) found a serious misrepresentation of age groups in her study of elementary school readers. A definite absence of meaningful characterizations of old people was reported by Ansello (1977) in his study of children's literature.

THE PRESENT STUDY

America is aging. Census Bureau data indicate that the median age rose from 27.9 in 1970 to 31.2 in July of 1984. Eleven percent of the total population is elderly--the highest proportion in the nation's history. From 1970 to 1982, the population over age 65 rose 33 percent, to 27 million (Spain, 1983).

Tuchman (1978) suggests that as particular social categories become more important as markets, the negative imagery applied to them tends to disappear. It should follow, then, that as larger numbers of Americans become elderly and more important as a market, less negative imagery should appear in media of all types, and since the media reflect symbolically the attitudes and values held by society, a more positive general attitude toward aging and the elderly should emerge.

The first written materials that most young children in America experience are the basal readers used in reading instruction. Basal readers are the most commonly used reading instructional materials in the primary grades (1-3) in the public schools (Burmeister, 1983). Just as several generations of children came to know Dick and Jane intimately, today's children often come to identify with the characters found in the basal readers. It's not just the characters that come across to the children, however; the images, values, and ideals of society come through, too.

Rationale

Because the number of elderly persons in America is growing and a more positive image of aging and the elderly should be developing, because studies such as those cited above are at least eight years old, and because basal reading materials play an important role during children's impressionable years, it is necessary to undertake the present study.

Purpose

It is the purpose of this study to analyze the content of stories in several basal reading systems widely used in primary grade reading instruction. This analysis is in terms of the relative frequency of main characters who are elderly, the quality of characterizations of elderly characters in relation to other characters in the stories, the incidence of aging themes, and incidental references to aging or the elderly.

PROCEDURES

The first phase of this study, which includes the development of a data gathering instrument and the use of the instrument in a pilot study, involves the following procedures: 1)development of data gathering instrument (see Appendix), 2)selection of basal reading systems for pilot study, 3)data gathering, 4)analysis, and 5)interpretation.

RESULTS

From the primary grade (K-3) reading instructional materials of The Addison-Wesley Reading Program (109 stories) (Rowland, 1982) and Scott, Foresman Reading (189 stories) (Aaron, Jackson, Riggs, Smith & Tierney, 1981, 298 stories were analyzed using the data gathering instrument (Appendix).

Character Representation

In the Addison-Wesley (A-W) materials, the average number of characters per story who were young was 1.97; adult, .91; and old, .18. The average number of characters in the Scott, Foresman (S-F) materials who were young was 1.51; adult, .99; and old, .19. Character representation is detailed in Table 1.

	YOUNG	ADULT	OLD	TOTAL
A-W	215	99	20	334
	64.4%	29.6%	6.0%	
S-F	286	188	36	510
	56.0%	36.9%	7.1%	
TOTAL	501	287	56	844
	59.3%	34.0%	6.6%	

Table 1. Character Representation

From these data, it can be seen that the elderly do not appear as primary characters to any great degree in the materials analyzed.

Human Characters: Positive Or Negative

Table 2 details human characters portrayed as positive or negative.

		YOUNG	ADULT	OLD	TOTAL
POS.	A-W	77	50	9	136
POS.	S-F	204	121	39	364
POS.	TOTAL	281	171	48	500
		49.4%	30.1%	8.4%	87.9%
NEG.	A-W	4	7	4	15
NEG.	S-F	24	22	8	54
NEG.	TOTAL	28	29	12	69
		4.9%	5.0%	2.1%	12.1%

Table 2. Human Characters: Positive or Negative

These data indicate that most human characters in the materials were portrayed in a positive manner.

Non-Human Character: Positive Or Negative

Table 3 presents details of the positive or negative portrayal of non-human characters.

	YOUNG	ADULT	OLD	TOTAL
POS. A-W	9	5	4	18
POS. S-F	22	26	2	50
POS. TOTAL	31	31	6	68
	34.8%	34.8%	6.7%	76.4%
NEG. A-W	2	2	0	4
NEG. S-F	6	8	3	17
NEG. TOTAL	8	10	3	21
	10.0%	11.2%	3.3%	23.6%

Table 3. Non-Human Characters: Positive Or Negative

A comparison of data from Table 2 and Table 3 shows a higher percentage of non-human characters being portrayed as negative.

Statements About Age Groups

Positive and negative statements about age groups are presented in Table 4.

	YOUNG	ADULT	OLD	TOTAL
POS. A-W	10	1	1	12
	83.3%	8.3%	8.3%	
POS. S-F	15	21	4	40
	37.5%	52.5%	10.0%	
POS. TOTAL	25	22	5	52
	48.1%	42.3%	9.6%	
NEG. A-W	2	0	1	3
	66.7%	0.0%	33.3%	
NEG. S-F	14	15	7	36
	38.8%	44.6%	19.4%	
NEG. TOTAL	16	15	8	39
	41.0%	38.5%	20.5%	

Table 4. Statements About Age Groups: Positive or Negative

The data in Table 4 show more negative than positive statements made about the elderly in the materials, while the percentages of negative statements about the young and the adults were lower than positive statements about these same groups.

Statements about the elderly, aging, and old age were made in terms of capacity loss, necessity of assistance, physical problems, and unattractiveness.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The pilot study is modest and may be considered only a beginning in determining the affect primary reading instructional materials have on the attitudes of children about aging and the elderly. The outcome of this study is a description of content found in the materials. The information found may lead to further research dealing with the cause and effect question about children's attitudes about aging and the elderly.

Of the 844 primary characters in the 298 stories analyzed, only 6.6% were elderly. This is comparable to the findings of Serra and Lamb (1984) who reported that only 6.8% of 1,036 basal reader stories (K-6) discussed or included elderly characters. Since more than 11% of America's population is elderly, and since the elderly age group is the fastest growing age group, basal reader authors and publishers must begin to increase the number of elderly primary characters in the stories, and increase the number of stories containing elderly characters.

While only 2.1% of the total number of human characters which could be assigned positive or negative portrayals (569) were elderly negative, 20% of the elderly primary characters were portrayed negatively. Producers of basal readers must begin to increase the

number of elderly characters portrayed in a positive manner.

Of the total number of non-human characters which could be assigned positive or negative portrayals (89), 3.3% were elderly negative. But of the total number of non-human elderly characters (9), 33.3% were portrayed negatively. Once again, the authors and publishers responsible must begin to increase the number of positive elderly non-human characters.

While 20.5% of the total number of statements made about age groups (91) were negative statements about the elderly, 61.5% of the statements made about the elderly were negative. Producers of basal reading materials would do well to include many more positive statements about the elderly.

CONCLUSION

From this study it can be concluded that the elderly appear far too infrequently as primary characters in basal reader stories, given the increasing number of elderly in society. Further, disproportionate numbers of elderly human and non-human characters are portrayed in a negative manner, and far too many negative statements are made about the elderly in basal reading materials.

Producers of basal reading materials must recognize and begin to reverse this situation.

Further research is underway to assess the effect of positive depictions of aging and the elderly on the attitudes of primary grade children toward the elderly.

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APPENDIX

DEPICTIONS OF AGING AND THE ELDERLY IN PRIMARY GRADE READING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

DATA GATHERING INSTRUMENT

Story_____Author_____

Publisher_____Level_____

Plot Outline_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Major Theme_____

_____

_____

Primary Characters Attributes Y A O

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Human Characters Young Adult Old

Positive _____

Negative _____

Nonhuman Characters	Young	Adult	Old
Positive			
Negative			

Statements about Age Groups	Young	Adult	Old
Positive			
Negative			

Statements about Elderly, Aging, Old Age

Non negative_____	Physical problems_____
Capacity loss_____	Unattractiveness_____
Needing assistance_____	Unclassified_____